

Websites Most Frequently Used by Physician for Gathering Medical Information

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Abstract

Physicians' use of the Internet to gather medical information has increased in recent years. Several studies have been conducted to explore the implications of this use on patient education, the physician-patient relationship, and diagnosis/decision making. In order to better understand the current and future implications of Internet use on patient care activities, it is important to know the Internet sources physicians prefer to consult. The objective of this study was to determine the Internet sources of information physicians most often use to gather medical information. This study demonstrated that the vast majority of physicians indicate they access a targeted site rather than utilize a search engine (such as Google©) to gather medical information. Of the targeted site types, most physicians indicate they use 1) edited/secondary data sources as their primary medical information data retrieving, 2) about one quarter of the physicians surveyed indicated research databases which provide access to medical journal publications 3) a minority of physicians use sites dedicated to their specialized area and 4) a small percentage use medical web site portals.

Methods

A study was conducted to identify which websites physicians prefer using for gathering medical information. As a basis for collecting data, the research team developed an online questionnaire. The online survey method was considered appropriate for this sort of research as it emphasizes collecting data from relatively large numbers of individuals. The Missouri Division of Professional Registration (www.pr.mo.gov) provided the name, last name, middle name and email for 4,671 (December 2004 data) medical physicians and surgeons licensed in Missouri, with e-mail addresses on record. 4,593 of the e-mails were deemed useful after reviewing the record set. Of these 3,113 (67%) lived inside and 1,478 (33%) outside of Missouri. Subjects were invited by automated personalized email to fill in the questionnaire and received one follow-up e-mail 15 days after the initial invitation. Data were analyzed using SPSS.

Results

We received a total of 381 valid responses to questions related to identifying preferred web sites for information gathering (8.3%). The vast majority (92%) of physicians indicate they access a targeted site rather than utilize a search engine (such as Google©) to gather medical information. 47.8% of subjects, who reported using a search engine as their preferred access to medical information reported that they do not consider the search engine an accurate source. In contrast, 96.7 % of physicians using a targeted site indicated they considered their on-line information source as being accurate. Of the targeted site types, 123 (32.3%) physicians indicate they use edited/secondary data sources as their primary medical information data retrieving. Specifically, 10.8% use Uptodate (www.uptodate.com), 8.4% use Medscape (www.medscape.com), 5.5% use Webmd (www.webmd.com), 4.7% use Mdconsult (www.mdconsult.com) and 2.9% use Emedicine (www.emedicine.com). More than one quarter (27.3%), 104, of the physicians surveyed indicated their on-site preferred source of medical information was research databases, which provide access to medical journal publications. Specifically, 19.7% use Pubmed (www.pubmed.org), 3.9% use Ovid, and 3.7% use Medline as their primary web source for on-line medical information gathering. A minority of physicians identified various sites dedicated to their specialized area, with no site representing more than 2.9% of the sample. Finally, a small percentage (3.1%) use medical web site portals (Mercmedicus, www.mercmedicus.com, for example) as their preferred means to gather medical information.

Discussion

The Internet may be an essential way for physicians to improve their medical knowledge and to acquire updated information about health care and their profession. Unlike many information seekers, physicians in search of medical data seem overwhelmingly to favor targeted sites rather than web browsing for medical information. It is of note that most targeted sites contain edited and/or secondary data. Since the knowledge gained on line is transformed in practice, one may question whether a comprehensive view is obtained when consulting an edited source and/or only one preferred source.